

# Spontaneous Writing: Letters to the Teacher

---

*By Gary P. Barkhuizen*

I have taught ESL in South Africa and in the USA to both children and adults. Without doubt, the most rewarding aspect of this teaching experience has been receiving letters from my students. As part of the writing component of the ESL programs I teach, I get my students to write letters to me. These are not letters to someone else for me to read or grade. They are actually addressed to me.

In this article I discuss how I use this communicative activity in my classes. I also offer guidelines to teachers who would like to include this form of letter-writing in their writing classes. Finally, I present a few examples of the letters that my high school students have written to me over the years.

## Setting the Task

At first some students find the idea of writing to the teacher a strange one; they feel awkward, and often do not know what to write. Concerned students want to know if the task is compulsory and if their product is going to be graded-the "does it count?" syndrome. Letter writing to the teacher does *not* count, as far as *grades* are concerned. It is, however, a useful writing exercise which gives the students writing practice. They write to a real person, and they write about real things.

Writing the letter is a form of freewriting. Because the letters are not graded, the students do not have to feel anxious about grammar or spelling errors, organization of ideas, or conforming to the conventional letter format. The students are told to relax and to concentrate on the content of what they write. Zamel (1987) warns that the flow of ideas of unskilled writers is often blocked when they pay too much attention to form. Writing letters to their teacher is an opportunity for students to let their ideas flow.

They can write as much or as little as they wish. Some letters I have received have been only a few lines long (see example at the end of the article), whereas others have been a few pages. Many students find this sort of writing a relief after the more structured, and usually graded, writing activities that form part of their writing program; this includes process writing, wherein the more time consuming brainstorming, revising, conferring, and editing are all stages in the process. Writing letters to the teacher is not a process. It is spontaneous writing which takes place in a nonthreatening, non-structured manner. For these reasons, the students enjoy the "break" and some often produce their best writing in their letters, albeit with a few errors. Leki (1991:11) says, "There is a place for error-free writing, but it does not have to be the main goal for writing classes." There is thus also a place in the writing class for letters to the teacher.

Students should not be asked to write to their teacher too often. Like most classroom activities, too much repetition means that the excitement soon fades and the students become bored. Besides this, it would be difficult for the teacher to cope with all the reading. I have found that getting the students to write to me about once every month, as a compulsory exercise, is enough to maintain their interest (and for them to gather newsworthy content). I do, however, invite my students to write to me as often as they wish in between these times, and many of them do.

A vitally important aspect of writing letters to the teacher is that the letters must be treated as confidential. They are written to the teacher and are meant for his or her eyes only. This allows the students to write about whatever they wish. They need not fear that their work will be shared with other members of the class, or with the teacher's friends or colleagues. If students want to share their letters with other people, that is their decision. The teacher, however must honor the confidentiality agreement. By doing so the teacher ensures that the students feel free to write about what is important to them without editing their thoughts.

## **The Aims of the Task**

Writing letters to the teacher is without doubt a communicative activity in the sense that "the learner uses the linguistic repertoire he/she has learnt, in order to communicate specific meanings for specific purposes" (Littlewood, 1981:17). In other words, the students have something that they want to write about, something which means something to them, and they express this to the teacher. The communication is thus real.

A second aim is to open up a communication channel between the students and the teacher. Often students, particularly children, find it hard to talk to their teachers about events in their lives, whether pleasant or sad. Also, I have found that some students want or need to share their thoughts or feelings with someone else, and they take the opportunity to do so in their letters. Language teaching and learning is always easier when the relationship between the teacher and students is a close one, as one of my student teachers recently wrote in his journal: "Relating to or identifying with a teacher plays a significant role in learning. The teachers I got on with were the ones that I was prepared to work for far beyond what was expected of me."

A fourth aim is to provide fun for both teacher and students. I certainly enjoy receiving and reading the students' letters, and many of them have told me that they like writing to me. Even those students who do not like writing say that if they have to write, they would rather write to me than write compositions, or reports or letters to imaginary people.

Finally, an indirect aim of writing to the teacher is for the teacher to receive informal assessment about his or her teaching or about the English program. I have discovered that once students get to know me they are only too willing to let me know about how I teach. They tell me what they find exciting or boring in my classes, and sometimes they make very constructive and helpful suggestions as to how I should do things in a different way. Furthermore, they often comment on the ESL program: what they like or do not like about it, if there is too much or too little work,

what skills are being neglected, what activities or content should be excluded or included, and so on.

## Content of the Letters

When I set my students the task of writing me a letter, I usually tell them that they can write about anything. Some students react by saying, "I don't know what to write," and others say, "I don't like telling people my secrets." I usually answer the first complaint by giving the students help. I suggest that they think about their hobbies, about school life, about their friends and family, about what they have done recently or what they plan to do in the future, or about a book they have read or a film they have seen. Concerning the second complaint, I tell the students that I do not expect them to write about their secrets or their problems. I do not pretend to be a psychologist or a social worker. I simply want the students to write and they can write about anything. Hopefully they choose a topic that interests them so that they enjoy the writing; usually they do.

It is possible, sometimes, to ask the students to comment on a particular topic in their letters. This should not be the focus of the whole letter, however. The instruction could be: "Write about anything you wish but please include a comment about the last short story we read in class." Students could also be asked to comment on the following: (a) work that has been covered in class, (b) teaching methods, (c) what they plan to do during the vacation, (d) what they plan to do when they finish school-especially relevant to senior students, (e) a recent test, (f) particular classroom activities, and (g) their progress in English. Comments on some of these issues could serve as useful feedback to teachers, and could be very helpful when planning further instruction.

## Reading the Letters

When I receive the students' letters I simply read them. I do not correct their errors. I tell them this when I set them the task. The aim of not correcting is to allow the students to feel relaxed when writing without having to worry about errors; to let their writing be spontaneous and unedited. Resisting the urge to correct is sometimes quite difficult for teachers. Old habits are hard to break. Students also find an absence of corrections on their pages a little strange at first, and some request that I do correct their work. "How am I going to learn what I am doing wrong?" they ask. I tell them that there is ample opportunity for them to have their writing corrected in the other writing activities that we do in class. Very soon they agree and accept the no-correction policy.

For the reasons mentioned above, I do not assign a grade to the letters. Furthermore, not grading the work means that there can be no comparing of grades, and hence competition is prevented. There are always students who like to see how they do in comparison with the other students in the class. Those with less English proficiency often feel intimidated by those with more, and

become inhibited during instructional activities. This, of course, will always happen, but I believe it is a good idea to provide fewer opportunities for destructive competition.

I do write something on their letters, however. If the students ask me questions, I answer them on the page next to the question. If they ask me for advice, I give it if I can. If I cannot, I tell them whom they can ask; for example, the school counselor or another qualified teacher. I also write comments in the margins next to something in the letter that I find interesting, or ask questions if there is something that I want to know more about.

At the end of the letter I write a general comment, either about some specific news in the letter or about the letter as a whole. I also show my appreciation for having received the letter and for having had the students share their news with me; for example, "Thanks for sharing your news with me. I enjoyed reading your letter very much."

After I have read the letters, I hand them back to the students. Once they have read my comments, which they usually do very enthusiastically, they can do what they wish with their letters. I suggest to them that they keep the letters in their writing files, together with their other writing, to have a record of all the writing they do in the ESL class.

## Example Letters

I now present samples of the letters that my high school ESL students have written to me in recent years. I have edited them slightly to ensure easy reading. I have also tried to categorize them to provide an idea of the wide range of topics that students choose to write about. (see Footnote 1 below)

A Good Personal Experience girl, aged 14 *Dear Dr. Barkhuizen:*

*Thank you for giving me this chance to write to you. Sir, last time I had asked you to give us more poems and you did. Thank you for giving us poems and also for going over my poems. I know that you didn't understand some of them, like "The Unknown Cave." You know Sir, I just wrote it, I don't know what came to my mind. Even some other people can't understand it. But I can. When I am thinking of the unknown cave, I think of a dark, scary cave with insects creeping all over it. And maybe a voice calling out, a woman's voice. A smooth, soft voice calling out.*

*I like imagining things like that. I even like reading stories like that. Where I can sit and imagine what would happen to a person who goes to the cave.*

*It was a pleasure writing to you, Sir. Next time I will write a poem which you will understand.*

*From Mavis*

Expressing A Mood girl, aged 16 Dear Dr. Barkhuizen

*I am writing this letter to you because I feel like telling somebody about my new hobby. I didn't want to tell other people because I thought that they'd probably only listen and then just laugh. Oh well, my new hobby is writing poetry. Sometimes I just feel that the whole world is against me, so I resort to pen and paper.*

*I have always thought that poetry is something that you read during some English lessons. Now I am happy that I realize part of the true meaning of poetry. It is a sort of sport to my brain, it relaxes my mind. I feel accepted and happy.*

*I started this hobby of writing poetry when my best friend was angry with me. My friend is a he and some boys really like being worshiped. Well, my friend is that kind of guy and he gets angry very quickly. Anyway, I thanked him for having been angry with me that day-it really helped!*

*I hope you enjoyed reading this letter. I will give you one of my new poems to read.*

Debbie

Suggestions For Teacher boy, aged 15 Gary

*It's a long time since we had our holidays. Maybe you wonder why we make mistakes towards the end of term. Our brains are filled up. They need a rest and they start to forget old things.*

*I think we've had enough of school. I do not feel like doing any more work at school from now on. I am tired of my everyday maths homework and tests which we write every week. Last Friday we wrote a maths test. I studied for it the day before but I knew nothing in the test. This shows that our brains are tired of working hard. They need to rest.*

*I wish tomorrow could be next week. I am already tired of school Sir. Please do me a favour and don't give us homework until the term ends. Our brains have had enough.*

Yours sincerely

Phindile

School News girl, aged 14 Dear Dr. Barkhuizen

*I would really like to tell you about what happened this afternoon. Just before the last period we heard someone crying out as if he or she had been bitten by a snake. We, in our classroom, looked out of the windows to see what was happening. We saw other pupils coming out their classes and looking at someone. It was Mrs. Baker. Rumors said that her husband passed away. It was such a scene. Pupils said that Mrs. Baker hit Miss Nash because she told her the bad news.*

*I sympathized with Mrs. Baker's feelings. I nearly cried but I told myself that I must be strong, and I didn't. Most female teachers went with Mrs. Baker to her home. We had a free history period, maybe because Miss Roberts was comforting poor Mrs. Baker. We wandered around the school and made a noise.*

*May God bless Mrs. Baker. Best wishes stay with you and may every little breath you take be blessed.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Mpho*

A Bad Personal Experience boy, aged 16 *Dr. Barkhuizen*

*I am experiencing the worst month of my life. I have had bad months but this one is really bad.*

*First, I can't get a date and most of my friends can. I thought I used to have "it" but recently I have lost it. In the past years I could get a date easily.*

*My parents punished me for coming home late one night. Why are parents not considerate? I came late because I went to this cool party with every cool person there. This was supposed to be my big break.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Glenton*

A Weird Letter boy, aged 15 *Dr. B.*

*I'm writing to tell you how, as a student, I am concerned about your well-being and future in this nice world in which we live.*

## **Conclusions**

Writing can be fun. Students should not feel that writing always has to be perfect, with well formed sentences and logical ordering of ideas. There are times in real life when people write spontaneously without revising or editing what they are writing; for example, notes, informal letters, instructions, and even examinations. Of course, there is a place in any writing program for both spontaneous and more controlled writing. There needs to be a balance. If there is, both the teacher and the students will find the more varied writing classes less tedious. When writing

is fun and the communication real, students, either children or adults, will be motivated to write more.

**Gary P. Barkhuizen** is senior lecturer and teacher trainer in the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa.

## References

- Leki, I. 1991. Teaching second language writing: Where we seem to be. *English Teaching Forum*, 29, 2, pp. 811-26.
- Littlewood, W. 1981. *Communicative language teaching: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zamel, V. 1987. Writing: The process of discovering meaning. In *Methodology in TESOL: A book of readings*, ed. M. H. Long and J. C. Richards. New York: Newbury House.

## Footnote 1

My Students have given me permission to include their letters as examples in this article.